DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 185 180 UD 020 407

AUTHOR Smith, Eliot R.; Kluegel, James R.
TITLE Causal Attributions Outside the Laboratory: Explaining Poverty.
PUB DATE 2 Jan 79
NOTE 15p.; Paper prepared for the American Sociological Association Session on Attribution, Cognitive, and Related Processes.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Attitude Measures; *Attitudes; *Attribution Theory; Political Attitudes; *Poverty; *Research Methodology; *Social Problems; Socioeconomic Influences

ABSTRACT

One hundred and seventy five adults were surveyed to collect data on attributes and attitudes related to poverty. The authors attempted to evaluate attributions outside a laboratory setting in order to collect data applicable to real-world settings, taking into consideration the complexities of modern society. The study was concerned with the relationship between abstract attribution processes and the meaningful real issues of social inequality. Two issues were considered: the determinants of attributions regarding inequality, and the role attributions play in mediating politically relevant attitudes. Factor analysis of responses revealed that attributions are largely determined by perceptions and other attitudes rather than by social position. Some ego-defensive attributions were also relevant. Attributions were found to have important consequences for politically relevant attitudes and policy preferences. The authors conclude that while laboratory derived theories of attribution are applicable to real world settings, they must be supplemented by broader-based studies. (Author/MK)

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Causal Attributions Outside the Laboratory: Explaining Poverty

Eliot R. Smith

James R. Kluegel

University of California, Riverside

Prepared for ASA Session

on Attribution, Cognitive, and Related Processes

2 January 1979

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Abstract

Survey data on attributions and attitudes related to poverty were obtained from a random sample of residents of a Southern California city. Attributions are determined largely by the respondent's perceptions and other attitudes rather than by concrete social position; some ego-defensive attributions are also evident. Attributions have important consequences for politically relevant attitudes and policy preferences. Laboratory-derived theories of attribution are applicable to these real-world settings, but complexities do exist.

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Causal Attributions Outside the Laboratory: Explaining Poverty

Social psychologists have extensively studied causal attributions with laboratory methodologies, often using as materials simple sentences such as "John laughs at the comedian." While much has been learned through such techniques, some questions remain that can only be answered in a different context. To what extent do people actually use, in their everyday lives, the attribution processes that they demonstrably can use in the laboratory? The underlying concern here is the relationship between abstract attribution processes and the meaningful and affect-laden real-world issues of the social hierarchy of inequality. This paper will address this concern through a presentation of results of a survey of residents of a Southern California city, which covered the general area of perceptions, explanations, and evaluations of aspects of inequality.

Two specific issues will be considered. First, what are the determinants of attributions regarding inequality? Are the attributions primarily influenced by patterns of information as Kelley's (1967) theory of attribution suggests, or by the perceiver's interests and ego-involvement (Sicoly & Ross, 1977), or by "ideological" factors, the perceiver's other attitudes and beliefs? Second, what role do attributions play in mediating politically relevant attitudes such as views on welfare, policies of income redistribution, etc.? Social psychologists implicitly claim, by their extensive study of attribution processes, that such processes have important consequences--but on the other hand, attributions could be epiphenomenal, generated by subjects only when

experimenters ask for them. In this paper, these issues will be addressed in the context of attributions for poverty and also in the more specific area of attributions concerning welfare recipients. Since much popular and social-scientific writing has focused on poverty and welfare as areas of concern, and since governmental policies intended to ameliorate poverty have been manifold, these questions are taken as representative of the broader area of inequality; less central questions such as attributions for wealth are excluded here due to space limitations.

Sample

The sample for this survey was 175 residents of Riverside, California, aged 18 years and over, selected randomly from a current city directory.* Interviews were by telephone, with a typical interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. A sufficient number of interviews were conducted face-to-face to permit methodological comparison, and there were no detectable differences in the quality of responses obtained by telephone and by personal interview. The sample size, though small in comparison to national surveys, is large enough to permit meaningful analysis of relationships (and is certainly as large as the sample for most laboratory studies of attribution and related processes). The sample does prohibit generalizations of findings to the most and least privileged strata in America, as they are not represented in substantial numbers. The results from this survey can best be seen as applying to what may be called the white American mainstream; even this limited generalizability exceeds what could be expected from a college-student sample.

Attributions for poverty

Three dimensions of explanatory belief have emerged from prior study of beliefs about social inequality (Feagin, 1975). Structuralist explanation describes inequality as the results of economic and social factors. Individualist explanation emphasizes the degree to which inequality results from individual differences in personal traits, ability, and efforts. Functionalist explanation sees inequality as necessary to motivate people to contribute in their performance of social roles. To measure these constructs, respondents were presented with a list of reasons for why the poor are poor and asked to rate the importance of each as an explanation for poverty; this question was drawn from Feagin (1975). A factor analysis of the responses revealed two strong factors that account for virtually all the systematic variance. Scores on these two factors, labeled structural and individual, will be used as measures of explanations for poverty. They refer respectively to endorsement of structural characteristics of society (such as failure to provide enough good jobs) and of individual factors concerning the poor (such as lack of effort or ability) as important causes of poverty. The reliabilities of the scales are .62 and .77 respectively. To indicate commitment to a functionalist explanation of the distribution of income, respondents indicated whether they thought income should be based more on a person's contribution to society or more on what it takes to get along.

Among the most important determinants of attributions for poverty are two kinds of belief: a perception that opportunity for advancement is or is not generally available in society, and the respondent's classification of himself/herself as poor or nonpoor. Belief in general

opportunity seems to lead respondents to adopt individualistic explanations for poverty (standardized b=.22, p<.01), but this belief is unrelated to structuralist explanations for poverty. Perceived poverty status, on the other hand, leads the respondent to adopt structuralist attributions for poverty in general (b=.23, p<.05), but is unrelated to individualist explanations for poverty. These findings are consistent with what we know about the determinants of attributions in general. With respect to the first finding, Kelley's (1967) theory would suggest that if opportunity is widespread (high consensus) then a person who does not take advantage of opportunities and remains poor would have personal responsibility assigned. The familiar Jones and Nisbett (1972) actor-observer difference in attributions seems to underlie the other finding mentioned above, with those who see themselves as poor (actors) assigning causality to aspects of the environment, while the non-poor, reacting as observers, assign personal causality.

Turning from other beliefs (such as opportunity and perceived poverty status) to concrete background variables as possible determinants of attributions, we find that such central aspects of social position as education and family income have little impact. The effect of occupation (dummy codes for the categories of professional and clerical, with the reference category being blue-collar) is limited to functionalist explanation: professional and clerical workers are both more likely than manual workers to endorse functionalist explanations (b=.25, p<.05 and b=.26, p<.01 respectively). A series of other variables have little or no effect: union membership, experience of unemployment, having friends and relations whom one views as poor, having received government aid such as welfare, and job authority.

Among background factors, the factor with the most consistent and powerful effect on attributions for poverty is age. The younger age groups (less than 35) were significantly more likely to endorse structural explanations ($b=.28$, $p<.01$) and less likely to hold individualist ones ($b=-.32$, $p<.01$) than were their elders. This seems to be a cohort (or generational) effect rather than a life-cycle effect, due to the exposure of the younger respondents during their years of greatest openness to political socialization to explicitly transmitted liberal ideologies, perhaps particularly during the late 1960's. A life-cycle effect would imply that younger respondents are more liberal because of their lower incomes, less job authority, and so on--yet in these data the age effect is present controlling for these other variables which themselves have small or nonexistent effects.

In summary, the overall pattern is that both aspects of one's own experience (having been unemployed, the kind of work one does) and aspects of one's self-interest (as indicated by income, for example) have very limited effects on attributions. The most significant determinants seem to be other beliefs (such as general opportunity) and those variables such as age which index the exposure of the respondent to the transmission of beliefs and attributions directly, through the media or otherwise.

Consequences of attributions for poverty

Do attributions for poverty have measurable consequences for other beliefs and attitudes? Results show, in fact, that for several dependent variables of major importance (such as the evaluated fairness of the distribution of income, policies of income equalization, and

attitudes toward welfare), that attribution measures are among the strongest predictors--stronger than such factors as age, occupation, or income. Structural attributions for poverty are related to what may be called liberal views on inequality--such as favorability to income equalization policies (b=.24, p<.01) and welfare spending (b=.23, p<.05), and an increased tendency to view the American distribution of income as unfair (b=-.24, p<.01). Individualist explanations for poverty, on the other hand, lead respondents in a more conservative direction. Commitment to a functionalist explanation of the distribution of income also (independently) is a source of opposition to redistributive social policies such as income equalization and welfare spending.

The impact of class, occupation, age, and similar background variables on the evaluation of the fairness of the income distribution, of income equalization, and of welfare spending, is almost all indirect: mediated by attributions. The respondent's income is the only variable that consistently influences these variables via a direct effect--a clear indication of effects of self-interest that are not ideologically mediated (i.e., mediated through other beliefs). For the most part, attributions play a key role in organizing respondents' beliefs about these properties of society, both mediating background influences and contributing independent variance of their own.

Attributions concerning welfare

To supplement the above analyses of respondents' views on poverty in general, attributions and attitudes on the specific topic of welfare were also measured. A set of items adapted from Feagin (1975) was admi-

nistered. The items fall into two types, and the separation of the items into these two sets was empirically confirmed by a factor analysis. One factor represents ascription of negative characteristics to welfare recipients (the higher the score, the less negative the respondent): for example, the item "Most people getting welfare are not honest about their need." The other factor reflects attitudes on welfare spending (a higher score represents more favorability to expenditures on welfare): for example, the item "One of the main troubles with welfare is that it doesn't give people enough to get along on." Thus, the two factors represent a non-economic set of attributions to welfare recipients and an attitude toward economic aspects of the welfare issue. The scales created to measure the two factors had reliabilities (alpha) of .73 and .67 respectively. The correlation between the scales was .33, much lower than the square root of the product of their reliabilities, demonstrating the discriminant validity of the measures (Campbell & Fiske, 1959).

The most important determinant of the welfare attribution scale was the respondent's social class: Middle-class identifiers are significantly more favorable toward welfare recipients than are working-class identifiers ($b=.20$, $p<.05$). This is rather surprising, given the objectively greater similarity of the position of welfare recipients to that of working-class observers than that of middle-class observers; one would expect a greater identification and hence less derogation of the welfare poor from the working class.

One explanation for these results comes from research on "defensive attribution" (Chaikin & Darley, 1973). This term refers to attributions that are influenced by one's ego-involvement in the situation: a desire

to protect oneself from the fear of negative outcomes. Defensive attributions are causal assignments that render the world controllable or at least predictable, lessening the perceived likelihood that some bad event will occur to oneself. Studies by Chaikin and Darley (1973) and Novak and Lerner (1968) demonstrate that psychological proximity is important in determining when defensive attributions will be made. If one observes a bad outcome befalling someone who is dissimilar to oneself, one is not particularly threatened and no defensive attributions will occur. However, a bad outcome occurring to a similar other may trigger considerable defensiveness. It is uncomfortable to consider the event as randomly caused or undeserved, for such events may happen to anyone, including oneself. The ascription of negative characteristics to the victim of the negative outcome, then, represents an attempt to both justify and explain why the person is suffering and why the observer cannot suffer a similar fate.

This process may underlie the negative reaction of working-class self-identified respondents to welfare recipients. Such respondents need to explain why they themselves cannot fall into poverty, and the explanation cannot be in terms of objective social position, for in such matters the poor are not greatly different from many working-class identitiers. Working class self-placement has been found to be a function of economic insecurity (Leggett, 1968) and of one's vicarious experience with poverty (Kluegel & Smith, 1978). Realistically, working class families are often in danger of economic disaster, in that a medical emergency (for instance) could wipe out the family's assets. Hence, the explanation for welfare status must be in terms of their negative personal characteristics rather than their objective circumstances,

permitting the observer to draw a line between himself and the welfare poor by derogating their moral integrity, efforts, and ability, just as Lane found in his working-class sample almost two decades ago (1962, p. 72). Middle-class identification, on the other hand, seems to express individuals' feelings of economic security and fate conrol. Middle--class identifiers see themselves as sufficiently distant from the welfare poor that they can psychologically afford to be sympathetic: no defensive attributions are necessary.

The results of the defensive attribution process that leads to negative attitudes toward welfare recipients are demonstrable in the current data. Holding constant attitudes toward welfare recipients, working-class identifiers have more favorable attitudes toward welfare spending than do middle-class identifiers (standardized b = -.13). (This finding is not hard to understand, given the nominally progressive nature of taxation in this country and the generally greater economic liberalism of the less privileged.) Yet the indirect effect of class identification on welfare-spending views, mediated through the attribution factor, is almost as large as the direct (liberalism) effect and is opposite in sign (it equals +.07). Hence, the indirect effect of working-class respondents holding negative views of the personal attributes of welfare recipients and therefore opposing spending on welfare almost completely counteracts what would otherwise be a greater willingness of such respondents to support governmental programs of aid to the poor. The total effect (direct plus indirect) of class identification on welfare-spending views is not significantly different from zero (r = -.06).

Conclusions

These results, while necessarily tentative due to the relatively small and geographically restricted sample, do parallel those of other recent studies, particularly in showing the centrality of ideological or symbolic factors in political attitudes and attributions (Sears and McConahay, 1973; McConahay and Hough, 1976). Our findings are also in general agreement with social-psychological theories of attribution, showing their operation outside the laboratory, with nonstudent populations, and with attitudes that are of some importance to the respondents' lives. Thus, the demonstrated range of applicability of such attributional processes is widened beyond prior research. The most interesting implications of the findings presented here may be the demonstration of the workings of this intra-individual process as it operates in response to a supra-individual sociological reality, the hierarchical structure of inequality in society as it is mirrored in people's perceptions.

This operation must now be seen, however, as more complex than many laboratory studies of attribution had suggested. Overlapping and cross-pressuring factors can be seen to affect individuals in this situation. In particular, there is evidence for a psychological process of accommodation, one that is less visible in the laboratory setting. As one example, structuralist and individualist explanations for poverty are nearly orthogonal to each other (as indicated by an oblique factor analysis), rather than being negatively correlated. It is as if people come to supplement a naive individualistic view of inequality with a more sophisticated appreciation of structural causes--but not to replace entirely the individualistic attributions. (This result is reminiscent

of laboratory findings of a near-zero correlation, rather than a strong negative one, between measures of personal and situational attributions; Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976.)

A second example is the opposing effects of social class on the economic and non-economic aspects of welfare attitudes, just discussed. The economic reasons that lead to greater liberalism on spending among working-class respondents are accommodated to the ego-defensive attributions that push in the opposite direction--a state of tension exists, in which neither set of forces is entirely victorious.

Finally, it is worth noting that, as mentioned above, relative economic position (indicated by family income) has no effect on attributions when other factors are controlled. However, increases in income are accompanied by a greater likelihood of viewing the distribution of income as fair, of opposing welfare spending, etc. Individuals seem to accommodate these interest-based attitudes (based in the desire to defend one's position in society) with other, perhaps more ideologically-based beliefs such as their attributions for poverty. Again, the conclusion must be that the control and the isolation of a few relevant attitudes that is possible in laboratory studies, while essential for the "purification" and determination of the properties of processes such as attribution, must be supplemented by broader-based studies such as surveys to yield a more adequate appreciation of the role of such psychological processes in the overall psychic economy of the person in society.

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